

WORLD ATLAS OF DESERTIFICATION, 2nd edition, edited by N. J. Middleton and D. S. G. Thomas, Arnold, London, 1997. No. of pages: x + 182. Price: £145.00 (hb). ISBN 0-340-69166-2.

This *Atlas* has been published under the auspices of UNEP. Most of the maps are the same as those in the 1st edition, prepared for the Rio Conference of 1992, but with better colours. There are new sections on Asia, Kenya, the Aral Sea basin, some success stories, and a reflection on the response of the USA to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The text has been expanded and there are a lot more references, especially to publications that have appeared over the last decade; the bibliography now runs to about 600 items. If you already have the 1st edition you might find it advantageous to stick with it and copy the 10 pages of bibliography rather than forking out £145.

Desertification is simply described as the degradation of productive drylands in the Preface, written by the new Executive Director of UNEP, Elizabeth Dowdeswell. She says that the *Atlas* presents an overview of these lands for those working at the global, regional and national level. 'It is intended to facilitate the work of governments at the Conference of the Parties of the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) and it is also aimed at a wider audience to be accessible through libraries, universities and schools.'

Despite the publicity desertification has obtained over

the last 25 years, the Director says it is continuing apace. I have been concerned with the subject throughout that period, in Africa and latterly in southernmost Europe and remain unconvinced. Figure 2.4 on p. 74 (taken from Hulme and Kelly, 1993) shows the area of active vegetation in the southern Sahara diminishing with rainfall in the early 1980s and then increasing after 1984. Figure 1.5 on p. 10, also from the Climatic Research Unit at UEA, shows rainfall in the Sahel continuing to increase, at least until 1995, towards its long-term mean (though the number of measuring stations has drastically diminished). Has the vegetation cover also continued to improve?

I still find it difficult to understand how the co-ordinating editors can edit both editions of the *World Atlas of Desertification* and also produce their intervening book, *Desertification: exploding the myth*, (Thomas and Middleton, 1994). Can we now expect a book from them demythologizing the myth, or reconstituting it?

#### References

- Hulme, M. and Kelly, M. 1993. 'Exploring the links between desertification and climate change', *Environment*, **35**, 4–45.  
 Thomas, D. S. G. and Middleton, N. J. 1994. *Desertification: exploding the myth*, Wiley, Chichester.

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LANDFORMS OF THE EARTH (CD-ROM) by Harald Frater, Springer-Verlag, Heidelberg, 1998. Price £24.39. ISBN 3-540-14610-5.

The packaging for this CD-ROM is designed to make it appear like a book; buried inside a book-sized box with an opening front cover is the usual plastic CD box, but there is no associated text other than the insert in this inner box. By comparison with an introductory book on geomorphology and Earth sciences, the experience of this IT alternative is disappointing. The installation instructions include a tiny but critical error; there is an annoying synthesized sound track; the commentary is in a computer-generated voice whose intonation and pronunciation are frequently wrong; the explanations are often partial or inadequate; and the choice of topics for videos is restricted and idiosyncratic. CD-ROM surely does have a great deal to offer, in terms of multimedia presentation of images of landforms, animated block-diagrams of landform development, and

video clips of surface processes. However, the balance between visual presentation and detailed explanation (which often demands textual presentation) is difficult to strike. While this CD might enthuse some junior school children and attract them to the subject, the excellent combination of text and CD provided by Press and Siever (1997) is an altogether better balance than this product offers, and shows clearly that CD *adds* a new dimension to the book format rather than *replacing* it. In this case, therefore, the packaging is the message, not the medium!

#### Reference

- Press, F. and Siever, R. (1997). *Understanding Earth*, 2nd edition, W. H. Freeman, New York, 681 pp (with CD-ROM).

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